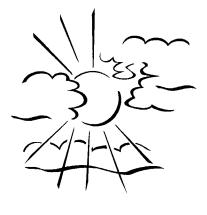
Department of Human Services

Articles in Today's Clips Thursday, February 16, 2006

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Prepared by the DHS Office of Communications (517) 373-7394



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Thursday, February 16, 2006 Detroit News Special Letter

Don't prematurely judge Ricky Holland case

The Feb. 14 article, "Slain boy, siblings abused," included unproven allegations regarding the Michigan Department of Human Services. It is entirely premature -- and irresponsible -- to draw conclusions about the Ricky Holland case, especially before the facts are known and a full investigation is completed.

When a child dies and the department has been involved in any way, we undertake a full review of the case -- every action taken and every decision made by the department -- to determine if something more could have been done to avert a tragedy. We look not only at the individual actions, but at our overall practices to ensure that our system provides the best possible protections for children.

The Detroit News portrayed the department as "unwilling" to release case details. In fact, the department is following state child protection laws as we are required to do even if releasing details would benefit the department.

We are committed to doing whatever needs to be done to keep children like Ricky safe -- and we share that commitment with law enforcement, the courts and other health and social services professionals, and of course, parents and citizens.

The death of Ricky Holland was a terrible tragedy. Like everyone, the child welfare community was shocked and saddened by his death, and our hearts go out to those who loved and cared for Ricky.

Marianne Udow Director Michigan Department of Human Services Lansing

Child abuse: Holland tragedy should prompt reforms – perhaps a 'Ricky's Law'

A Lansing State Journal editorial Published February 16, 2006

The shock of Ricky Holland's homicide is still fresh in this community's memory, yet a more tragic revelation has come from recent court testimony.

There are strong indications the 7-year-old child had been physically abused, and that his surviving siblings also suffered abuse in the months following Ricky's disappearance last July.

Most shocking of all: This was no family secret. School officials suspected it. They reported it. Social workers also noted signs of abuse as recently as last month, according to court documents.

Yet, Ricky remained with his adoptive parents until he disappeared. And his siblings remained in the custody of Tim and Lisa Holland of Williamston until last month, when they were charged with open murder in Ricky's death.

Something went terribly wrong in this case. The system failed Ricky and his siblings. Changes in state policy are imperative. State leaders must give the Michigan Department of Human Services needed funding to ensure proper preventive care and oversight of foster families.

We'd urge a mid-Michigan legislator to advocate a new law - "Ricky's Law." Meanwhile, the state should look at these issues:

- The DHS doesn't have enough caseworkers in child protective services. DHS Director Marianne Udow has testified that funding for added staff remains a problem. Gov. Jennifer Granholm's proposed budget calls for an added 51 staffers for child protective services. Lawmakers should support that increased staffing.
- The most recent Children's Ombudsman report faults child protective services for not complying with a policy requiring caseworkers to assess all children in a home that's being investigated not just one child. In fact, the report says "noncompliance with this policy" has been noted four different times in the annual reports.

The governor and lawmakers should demand DHS comply with its own child protection policy.

- When a child with special needs is adopted by a non-relative (as was Ricky), there is no state oversight of the child's family life. Lawmakers and the government need to rethink that no-oversight policy.
- The state should undertake a comprehensive review of both the foster care system, as well as the Family First program, which attempts to keep children with their biological parents even if there's evidence of abuse.

There's no easy answer here. Foster parents can be worse than the parents a child has been taken from. Lansing-area attorney George Zulakis, who specializes in child abuse issues, tells the Detroit News: "Very frequently, the foster families are underpaid and overwhelmed, not highly trained and dysfunctional themselves."

DHS Director Udow promises the agency will thoroughly examine the Holland case "to determine if a tragedy could have been averted."

That's well short of what's needed. If Michigan leaders are honestly committed to preventing another tragedy like Ricky's, they have to come up with the money and other resources necessary to protect our most vulnerable citizens. The task lies in the laps of the Legislature and the governor.

Welfare agency blamed for abused boy's death

Detroit News Letters February 16, 2006

State workers don't do job

Another tragedy, another notch in Michigan Department of Human Services' belt ("Slain boy, siblings abused," Feb. 14). When is this going to stop? When are those who are placed in charge going to do the job they are paid to do?

Seven-year-old Ricky Holland didn't have a chance and those who were supposed to care for him couldn't have cared less. His adoptive parents, Lisa and Tim Holland, are accused of murdering Ricky, but those sent to check on him from the state may be guilty as well. It turned a blind eye to the situation and by doing so condoned it.

This isn't the first time so-called child protection workers have failed and failed miserably, but let's hope it's the last.

Ronald and Lois Navickas Shelby Township

Case cries for death penalty

The death of Ricky Holland is the best example I have seen of the need for the death penalty in Michigan. While the state is at it, throw the state workers who allowed Ricky to stay in this situation into prison for a few years. Let them contemplate what they didn't do to save this boy. *Gregg J. Allen*

Battle Creek

Inaction begs for reform

How many children do we have to lose like Ricky Holland before we start doing something? What good does it do to go visit a family knowing the child or children are neglected and abused, putting it on record in a file and closing the drawer? The Michigan Department of Human Services needs to get on the ball or replace about half of the staff, including the leader, or get a new system.

Dorothy Kistler Sterling Heights

Human Services in denial

Like the abusive parents who failed to protect and nurture their (adopted) children, the Michigan Department of Human Services is in complete denial about its own complicity in the alleged murder of Ricky Holland and the abuse of his siblings. The Hollands have pleaded not guilty, and their attorneys doubtless hope a jury sympathizes with the circumstances under which their clients parented.

Ricky's murder is symptomatic of multilevel incompetence so pervasive that the department can't concede -- can't, in fact, conceive -- there's any better way to serve its clients.

Nord Christensen

Dexter

Prosecutor: Injuries result of 'intentional child abuse'

STACY LANGLEY, The Huron Daily Tribune

02/15/2006

BAD AXE — "The medical viewpoint is that the baby's injuries were a result of intentional child abuse."

Those were the words of Huron County Prosecutor Mark J. Gaertner this morning after reviewing the official medical records of the 1-month-old baby boy from Bad Axe who recently sustained severe head injuries.

Gaertner, along with investigators from the Huron County Sheriff's Office, executed a search warrant Tuesday afternoon at Hurley Medical Center in Flint. Their goal was to learn more about the baby's medical condition and possible cause of his injuries.

"We have obtained medical records and other relevant information, and we interviewed the pediatrician attending to the baby, Dr. Brian Nolan, who specializes in critical care," Gaertner said. "He's also been qualified as an expert witness in courtrooms around state of Michigan and told us the head injuries (the baby sustained) are more severe than if the child had been in an automobile accident.

"He has determined that the baby's injuries are not consistent with being accidental and that the baby is very lucky to be alive."

Geartner, along with Det./Sgt. Ron Roberts and Det. Richard Koehler, reviewed the medical records Tuesday with Dr. Nolan.

"The doctor has stated the baby has severe head injuries and this is not an isolated incident nor is it accidental," Gaertner said. "There is evidence of other abuse. We're looking at this as intentional acts of child abuse.

"The child is making a slow recovery, and that's the good news. He's out of intensive care and he could be released to DHS (Department of Human Services) as early as today or by the end of the week for placement in foster care."

Gaertner said Assistant Prosecutor Elizabeth V. Weisenbach is preparing the appropriate paperwork for juvenile court for the baby to be placed upon release from the hospital into foster care with no visitation by his parents.

"None, that goes for both children — the 1 month old and the 1 year old as well," Gaertner said. "Right now the focus of the investigation is on the parents. The 1 year old is in foster care — he's staying there — he's doing very well in foster care. The parents do have visitation, but there will be a motion to put an end to that."

The situation came to light after the baby's father, a 23-year-old Bad Axe man, called 9-1-1 just before 11 a.m. on Feb. 4 to report the 1-month-old baby was having trouble breathing. The baby was found with serve head injuries and taken to Huron Medical Center for medical treatment before being transferred to Hurley.

The investigation into the cause of the baby's injuries continues. No charges have been filed in the case.

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Elementary Teacher Arrested for Having Sex with Children

By Mary Conway Web produced by Seth Myers

February 16, 2006

An Oak Park elementary school teacher is now in the Oakland County Jail, facing charges of Criminal Sexual Conduct with 2 young children.

32-year-old James Norman Perry is accused of having sex with one of the children and trying to have sex with the other.

Because of the sensitive nature of the case, police would not discuss the ages of the children involved.

Lt. Steve Cooper, of the Oak Park police, said an investigation into Mr. Perry began in October of 2005.

Perry, a teacher at Oak Park's Key Elementary, has been suspended from his job at the school. That suspension came on Tuesday, prior to his arrest.

The teacher is being held at the Oakland County Jail on a \$100,000 cash bond. As a condition of that bond, he must wear a GPS monitor at all times and cannot work in a school. Perry is prohibited from coming in contact with anyone under the age of 16 and cannot enter any school property.

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Pair accused of caging kids charged

CLEVELAND — A couple accused of forcing some of their 11 adopted children to sleep in cages say the criminal charges filed against them are a government vendetta. Michael and Sharen Gravelle, indicted on charges of child endangerment, falsifying adoption applications and lying under oath when being qualified for adoption funding, have denied mistreating the children, ages 1-15. The youngsters were placed in foster care last fall.

Bills would help protect children, environment

Michigan lawmakers took an important step in battling the problem of methamphetamine last year by approving laws that make it more difficult to manufacture the drug.

Now they need to turn their attention to two areas often devastated by the meth scourge: families and the environment. Not only does meth production frequently create hazardous waste sites, but officials estimate that children live in about 80 percent of meth labs discovered in homes. Legislation introduced this week would create statewide standards for cleaning up meth labs to help ensure that all sites are properly handled and returned to usable condition. Such standards would help prevent future problems on sites that had not been thoroughly cleaned. Other bills would protect children by clarifying that the suspicion of meth exposure is a symptom of child abuse and must be reported; allow longer probationary periods for people convicted of meth-related crimes, and allow meth-related offenses to be used in determining child custody cases.

Meth addiction often is so strong that users are willing to ignore everything else but the drug, including their children and their homes. That is why it is important for the state to protect kids from the abuse and neglect that can accompany meth use, as well as safeguard the environment against the toxic materials that are the result of meth production.

Meth use has been particularly damaging in rural communities, where out-of-the-way labs can go unnoticed more easily - as can the resulting environmental damage. That's why statewide standards should be established for cleaning up such sites.

Laws enacted last year now require retailers to keep products containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine - a key ingredient in meth production - in supervised areas or behind the counter. We hope this will be effective in reducing meth labs, because the problem has not yet shown any signs of diminishing. Officials busted at least 250 meth labs in Michigan last year, up more than 20 percent from 2004. By comparison, only three labs were seized in the state a decade ago.

Bills introduced this week might not reduce meth use, but they could at least help its most innocent victims.

Originally published February 16, 2006

Teacher sex registry to be recalled

February 16, 2006

BY LORI HIGGINS FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

Employees fired because their names wrongly appeared on lists of school workers who are sex offenders could get their jobs back now that a judge has halted release of the information. U.S. District Judge Paul Gadola issued a temporary restraining order in a ruling late Tuesday. The order calls for the lists to be recalled.

Earlier this month, school districts began receiving lists of employees with criminal backgrounds, part of new laws that went into effect Jan. 1 aimed at ridding schools of sex offenders. The laws require all school employees to be fingerprinted and have their backgrounds checked. Districts must immediately fire any employee convicted of a sex crime.

There has been widespread concern about inaccurate information since the lists went out to districts.

Gadola granted the request of the Michigan Federation of Teachers, a state union that represents school employees.

"Our goal was to ensure that when the state sends out a list to the districts that the list is accurate," said Beth Thoreson, spokeswoman for the union. Districts are now awaiting guidance from the Department of Education on recalling those who have been wrongly fired. It was unclear Wednesday how the lists would be recalled. Martin Ackley, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Education, said in an e-mail late Wednesday that the department is notifying school districts that it is recalling all copies. Districts will have to return the lists to the department.

Contact LORI HIGGINS at 248-351-3694 or higgins@freepress.com.

State asks school districts to return criminal lists Judge orders recall, stops officials from any personnel decisions based on background checks.

Christine MacDonald and Marisa schultz / The Detroit News

The state is asking school districts to return a controversial list of their employees' criminal histories that it sent three weeks ago to administrators, after a federal judge ordered the recall because of errors.

The Michigan Department of Education has begun mailing letters to districts, telling them to send back all their copies, spokesman Martin Ackley said Wednesday.

It's the latest twist in a school safety issue that has angered parents and unions alike. The background checks were initiated to remove employees who found jobs in schools despite being convicted of dangerous crimes. Unions argue the state's list is riddled with mistakes, and many parents are frustrated they can't get access to the correct information because of court orders preventing their release.

Both union and school lawyers say the recall, issued Tuesday by U.S. District Judge Paul V. Gadola, stops school districts from making any further personnel decisions based solely on results from the list.

"It must be treated as if the list was never received," said William Albertson, with the Lansing-based Thurn law firm that represents more than 400 state school districts. "It is devoid of any legal significance."

Many districts have already taken action against employees on the list after using other means to verify the convictions, such as fingerprinting verification and ICHAT, the Michigan State Police's Internet Criminal History Access Tool, school officials said. ICHAT can filter out more potential mistakes.

The recall should not prevent school districts from removing employees who have sex crime convictions, said Brian Whiston, director of government of community services at the Oakland Intermediate School District.

School districts should independently verify an employee's criminal conviction and take action if necessary, he said.

"If you've got accurate information, move forward on this," Whiston said.

On Friday, state police said they would do a second criminal history check on school employees to provide a more reliable list. The new list should be available by early March.

The original search revealed school employees with more than 4,600 criminal offenses, 2,200 of which were felonies, including murder, sex crimes and kidnapping. Whiston said the list has about a 50 percent error rate, according to his conversations with local superintendents.

You can reach Christine MacDonald at (313) 222-2269 or cmacdonald@detnews.com.

What's next

School districts must return its list of school employees convicted of crimes to the state. A federal judge is expected to review the 10-day temporary restraining order and could decide to extend it or make a final ruling.

School crime list recalled

Wednesday, February 15, 2006

COREY MITCHELL THE SAGINAW NEWS

Mid-Michigan school officials are breathing a sigh of relief after a federal judge's order to recall all copies a list of school employees with criminal convictions, with one superintendent is calling the entire ordeal "a fiasco."

The temporary restraining order that U.S. District Judge Paul Gadola issued Tuesday is similar to one Ingham County Circuit Judge Joyce Draganchuk issued Friday.

However, Gadola's order also requires the defendants -- the state, the Department of Education and the Michigan State Police -- to recall all copies of the list previously released to local boards of education or other units of government.

Critics say the list is riddled with inaccuracies that could harm the reputations of innocent workers or even cost them their jobs. Swan Valley School District Superintendent Richard Syrek agrees.

The list erroneously indicated one Swan Valley worker had a criminal past.

"It's been a fiasco," Syrek said of the release, retraction and recall of the criminal background checks.

"We want to protect our kids but let's get things straight. People who have not done anything could be hurt by this."

The 35,000-member Michigan branch of the American Federation of Teachers sought the restraining order from Gadola. The order is in place for 10 days, and the union said it expects a hearing soon on whether to make the order permanent.

A lawyer for the union's Michigan unit, Mark Cousens, said the recall that Gadola ordered stops school districts from making any more personnel decisions based solely on results from the lists. "If they don't have the list, they can't use it," Cousens said. "It doesn't exist."

Officials with the state Department of Education were unaware of the ruling late Tuesday, a spokesman said.

"We are going to sit down with our legal counsel and sort out the ramifications of this ruling," Martin Ackley said.

A new law targeting sex offenders prompted the state to check the criminal histories of more than 200,000 school employees. School districts began receiving names from the state this month.

Draganchuk's ruling followed testimony from four teachers who appeared on the list with convictions for drug violations, domestic abuse and other offenses. All four said they had never committed any crimes.

"The intent of the law is very good," said Birch Run Area Schools Superintendent Wayne Wright, "but it's caused a lot of anguish and a lot of problems for a lot of people."

It is unclear when the correct list of convicted workers will become available, but state officials have pointed towards early March.

"Are there still going to lots of problems?" Syrek asked. "I don't know, but it's a possibility."

State leaders should wait for the results of mandatory employee fingerprinting before making criminal histories public, Syrek and Wright said.

"If they wait for that, there shouldn't be problems," Wright said.

Under the law that took effect Jan. 1, school officials must fire sex offenders on the list. Those with felony convictions must receive approval from the superintendent and school board to stay employed.

Michigan

E-mail could alert you to nearby sex predators

State House approves bill; warnings would start in '07

February 16, 2006
BY CHRIS CHRISTOFF
FREE PRESS LANSING BUREAU

LANSING -- Have any convicted sex offenders moved to your neighborhood lately? You could sign up for automatic e-mails alerting you to such moves, under legislation that headed toward final approval Wednesday.

The free e-mail service would be available through the Michigan Sex Offender Registry beginning in January 2007. The revised Web site also will allow searches for specific offenders without their approximate age -- a requirement that now makes searches more difficult.

The state House approved the e-mail notification Wednesday on a 94-12 vote. If the Senate agrees to a minor change, the bill will go to Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who said she would sign it.

The bill's main sponsor, Sen. Alan Sanborn, R-Richmond, said the e-mail alerts would make the sex offender registry more convenient. He said Ohio uses similar alerts.

"I've got three kids, one still at home, and I don't peruse the State Police sex-offender list all the time," Sanborn said Wednesday. "But I do check my e-mail. It's nice if you get the alert."

Sanborn said he lives in a rural area where children go to homes selling merchandise for school fund-raisers or for such activities as Girl Scouts. "There's a lot of practical reasons to know there's a house you don't want your kids to go to," he said.

Margaret George, 40, of Sterling Heights said she keeps track of registered offenders in her community. She approved of the proposed e-mail alerts, but said that not everyone would benefit because many homes don't have a computer.

"I think it is a good idea, but we have to go farther because there are a lot of laws set, and they need to get stricter and stop letting" sex offenders "out of jail," George said.

Rep. Aldo Vagnozzi, D-Farmington Hills, was one of 12 House members who opposed Sanborn's bill. He said the sex-offender registry list could incorrectly list people not convicted of sex crimes.

"It's got to be 100% correct," Vagnozzi said. "I don't think we should subject anyone to being targeted and then find out they didn't do anything."

Willowbei Eversole, 59, of Huntington Woods said the sex-offender list should not include adolescents who are convicted of minor sex offenses, such as consensual sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Eversole, who has three grown stepchildren, said names of younger offenders should be removed from the list after a few years.

Under the law, the names of people convicted of designated sex felonies and misdemeanors go on the list for 25 years. The list went on the Internet in 1999.

"I think there ought to be some kind of grading system for the age of the offender," Eversole said. "Society has just gone overboard, in my opinion, with trying to make things right. They err too far on the side of infringing on people's liberties who may have made a mistake when they were young." It's not known yet whether the e-mail alerts will include the names of sex offenders that are new to the list, or merely link subscribers to the registry Web site, where they can scan their ZIP code for new names.

State Police spokeswoman Shanon Akans said the e-mails are only part of a revised State Police Web site that will be easier to use. She said the e-mail alerts would not require more employees.

Contact CHRIS CHRISTOFF at 517-372-8660 or <u>christoff@freepress.com</u>. Staff writers Chastity Pratt and Stan Donaldson contributed to this report.

Balance privacy with parents' right to know

Kalamazoo Gazette

Monday, February 16, 2006

Should parents have the right to know if the person who drives the bus that takes their children to school every day has ever had a misdemeanor drunken driving conviction?

Should they know whether the person who supervises the school playground has ever had a misdemeanor drug conviction?

Yes, parents should have these rights.

That's why we're concerned about a bill that cleared the state House Education Committee on Wednesday. The legislation exempts most misdemeanor convictions of school employees from being disclosed under the state Freedom of Information Act.

It amends a new state law designed to ferret out school employees with criminal records -especially those with felonies and misdemeanors involving sexual or physical assault.

The law will require that all of the state's 209,000 school employees submit to fingerprinting
over the next two and a half years, the fastest way to determine whether someone has a criminal
past and a way to ensure that school districts are informed if school employees are convicted of
crimes in the future. We have applauded the program. We also have said the state should be
paying for the fingerprinting program and not just laying another unfunded mandate on school
officials.

But until the fingerprinting is completed, the Michigan State Police have been running school employee names through its database and notifying school districts when any school employees' names turn up.

The trouble is that the state police list of people with convictions has wrongly identified a number of innocent people.

Because of the high number of ``false positives," an Ingham County judge last week ruled that the state Department of Education can't make public a list of school employees identified as having convictions.

State Rep. Rick Baxter, R-Hanover, introduced a bill this week, House Bill 5675, designed to remedy the problem of wrongly accused school employees' names being made public. In addition to instructing the state Department of Education to make every effort to ensure that the list is accurate, it also exempts from the Freedom of Information Act schools from disclosing the list to the public for 14 days. That should give school officials enough time to determine whether any school employees have been falsely identified.

That's a good idea. It's imperative that sensitive and potentially career-ruining information like this be absolutely accurate.

But we're concerned about a provision in Baxter's bill that specifically exempts from Freedom of Information Act disclosure accurate information about school employees who are convicted of misdemeanors other than for sexual or physical assault.

We urge lawmakers to reach a compromise on this. If lawmakers feel it would be unfair to school employees to have 20-year-old misdemeanors dredged up, then perhaps exempting misdemeanor convictions older than 10 or 15 years might make more sense.

We understand the desire of lawmakers to not allow a law to increase school safety to turn into some kind of witch-hunt.

But we also must balance that concern against the rights of parents to know the criminal histories of those to whom they entrust their children every day.

A good bill, backed by a good idea, is fighting for life

Web-posted Feb 16, 2006 EDITORIALS The Oakland Press

Full public access to facts residents are entitled to know is fighting for its life these days in Michigan. A straightforward attempt to make sure convicted criminals employed by schools are identified now is endangered. It has been delayed in the Legislature and nearly derailed by the discovery that many school employees who were identified by official records as having been convicted of a crime had not. It turns out this was not simply sloppy recordkeeping. Instead, the problem is one the nation is just beginning to catch on to. Millions of Social Security numbers have been used by others, such as illegal aliens, to establish their own official identities. An individual wouldn't know that until, as happened this time, a search by employee Social Security numbers turned up criminal records that belonged to someone else who also was using that number.

This gave foes of the public release of the information new ammunition to protest it. While it's understandable that individuals involved don't like the publicity, school employees work with children or in close contact with them. So, it obviously is important that any criminal record they might have be available to others.

But a bill before the Michigan Legislature right now would prevent the public from seeing any misdemeanor or felony records, except those involving sexual or physical abuse.

While that might sound reasonable, as the Michigan Press Association points out, it still would keep secret a school employee's alcohol problem or other illegal drug use or thievery.

If you want this sort of information about school employees publicly available, let your state representative know because this restrictive bill is making its way through the Michigan House. Phone or e-mail to protect your right to know - within hours, not days.

Wage increase comes with hidden cost

An attempt is under way to put a state minimum wage increase on the November ballot. It is a national effort whose chief aim is not so much to raise the basic wage as it is to attract more Democratic voters to the polls and, in Michigan's case, help re-elect Sen. Debbie Stabenow and Gov. Jennifer Granholm, among others.

If the issue gets on the ballot and is approved, it could make the minimum wage here higher than the national minimum and index it to the rate of inflation, too. Right now, it is \$5.15 an hour and a bill in Lansing would send it to \$6.65 and up.

It always would be one of the highest in country. That is all a state with what demonstrably is the nation's worst business climate needs. It would reinforce the world's impression that this is a high-cost place to do business and proud of it.

You might think such a change simply would be a well-deserved raise for the state's "working poor." But history tells us it mainly would cost many of them their jobs. The last time the minimum wage in Michigan was increased in 1996, about 20,000 young people in Detroit were laid off as no longer affordable.

Don't do their contemporary counterparts a "favor" by hiking the wage.

THE OAKLAND PRESS

Mom says third boy abused at Highfields County weighs continuing \$2M payments today

By T.M. Shultz Lansing State Journal

ONONDAGA - A third instance of inappropriate employee behavior at Highfields Inc. surfaced Wednesday, a day after Ingham County court officials removed 18 boys from the residential treatment facility about 20 miles south of Lansing.

The boys were taken Tuesday from Highfields after the court received two reports of staff members mistreating boys.

The reports led to a decision by Ingham County judges to cancel the county's involvement with the program.

Today, an Ingham County Board of Commissioners committee intends to take up the issue of continued payments to Highfields, which the county pays nearly \$2 million a year for two programs. One of those programs sets aside 24 beds for troubled youngsters.

Juveniles without a history of serious offenses are ordered to Highfields on a range of charges, such as truancy and alcohol possession.

Four separate investigations into Highfields have been launched - two by state authorities looking at possible violations of the facility's license and contract, one by the Ingham County Sheriff's Office into criminal behavior and one by Highfields officials.

Twenty-four youngsters remain at Highfields in other programs from counties throughout the state. As of late Wednesday, Highfields President Jim Hines said no other counties had pulled children from the facility.

Employee disciplined

The third incident - confirmed Wednesday by Hines - happened Jan. 9 when 15-year-old Ronale Bond, son of Lansing resident Tia Franklin, refused to shovel snow outside his Highfields cottage.

Franklin says a Highfields employee shoved her son's face into the snow and held him down until his ear hurt.

"It took him two or three days before he could hear out of that ear again," Franklin said. "People think their children are safe in places like this, and they're not."

Hines said the employee involved was disciplined.

"Yes, there was a situation where there was shoveling, and yes, he was restrained in the snow," Hines said.

But that's not why the residential counselor was disciplined, Hines explained. He was disciplined for acting alone instead of in concert with another employee, which is Highfields' policy.

Because of that infraction, the employee was suspended for a week, given more training and put on special employment conditions.

The Ingham County Sheriff's Office is investigating a Monday incident in which a boy was taken outside at night after he acted up; that boy also ended up in the snow. Highfields officials are investigating the incident as well.

"They need to make sure they fully investigate this and be a little bit more careful on their staffing," Franklin said. "It was a good program a long time ago."

Policy outlined

Hines explained that at Highfields, hands-on restraint of a child is allowed but only when two employees use the technique together.

The theory is that two people will act as a check on one another so the situation doesn't get out of hand, he said.

A lone employee can put his hands on a boy, but only if the youngster is attempting to escape or is trying to hurt himself or others.

A boy, Hines said, "might end up with his face in the snow," but shoving a kid's face in a snowbank is not acceptable.

'Serious' allegations

"The allegations that are under investigation are very serious," said Nervy Oliver, Ingham County deputy court administrator for the juvenile division.

He said of the 18 boys removed from Highfields, two were sent to the Ingham County Youth Center on Jolly Road and 16 were sent home under house detention.

None of the boys will be sent back to Highfields anytime soon, he said.

"Until there's been complete changes from top to bottom, not one of my kids are going there," said Circuit Judge Richard Garcia, who supervises seven of the 18 Ingham County youngsters. "There's no trust."

Although the Ingham County Board of Commissioners pays Highfields almost \$2 million for two Ingham County programs, Garcia said it's the judges who decide where troubled juveniles sleep at night.

"If I order a child to be placed (somewhere), they have to pay the bill," Garcia said of the county's Board of Commissioners. "It's not a political issue. We make placement decisions."

Highfields' total annual budget is \$6.5 million to \$7 million, Hines said, so losing \$2 million of that will have serious financial consequences for the residential treatment facility.

Contact T.M. Shultz at 377-1061 or tshultz@lsj.com.

Judge holds hearing on incident in shower area at Highfields

Ingham County Circuit Judge Richard Garcia held a review hearing Wednesday for a boy involved in what the judge called a hazing incident that occurred about three weeks ago in a shower area at Highfields Inc. Garcia said the boy had cleaning solutions and soap thrown at him and was hit with fists and dominoes by several boys.

"An untrained staff member gave the green light to these boys to basically beat this kid up in the shower," Garcia said.

But the residential counselor who was the lone adult in the home that night said that's not what happened. He said the youth in question was fully clothed and not in the shower at the time.

Herb Haygood, a former Michigan State University wide receiver and co-captain of the 2001 football team who played in the NFL for three years, said the incident was just good-natured horseplay that he stopped as soon as it started. Haygood admits to a mistake in judgment in not notifying his superiors of the incident - in which he said no one was hurt. He said he compounded his mistake later when he told his superiors that he gave the boys the go-ahead to engage in the horseplay in an attempt to protect them from getting into trouble.

"They were joking around. Even (the youth who had soap thrown on him) was laughing. There was no hazing," Haygood said. "I never allowed that even when I was co-captain of the (MSU) team."

Macomb Briefs February 16, 2006 Detroit News

Mount Clemens

Girl pleads no contest in bomb threat case

A 12-year-old Clinton Township girl pleaded no contest Wednesday to a charge of a making a terrorist threat against Wyandot Middle School. The girl, whose name was withheld because of her age, made the plea before Macomb Circuit Judge Mark Switalski. She allegedly sent two instant messages to her friends that she was going to bomb her middle school. She faces a maximum penalty of being sent to the county youth home until she is 19. "This disposition gives her the opportunity to demonstrate that this was an isolated incident and a childish mistake," Prosecutor Eric Smith said.

Student describes fight that left teacher with fractured skull

Thursday, February 16, 2006

By Nardy Baeza Bickel The Grand Rapids Press

WYOMING -- Two alternative high school students are suspended and awaiting possible assault charges in juvenile court after they allegedly were involved in a fight this week that left a teacher with a fractured skull.

Kelloggsville teacher Margaret Bauw was treated and released from the Spectrum Health Butterworth Campus emergency room Monday for the head injury, suffered when she was one of two educators who tried to stop a lunchtime fight between two students, police and students at Discovery High School said.

Bauw, 59, was deliberately pushed to the ground and struck her head following a fracas between the male students in the school cafeteria.

Another teacher intervened in the fight and was leading one of the students away when the second student began pursuing them, students said. Bauw tried to corral that student and was shoved aside.

Bauw declined to comment on the incident, which shook other students in the 173 54th St. SW alternative school, where teachers and students are on a first-name basis.

Megan Youness, a 16-year-old student, said the fight and Bauw's injury caused "drama" in the school.

"We all were around (them) and when I saw her fall, I grabbed on my friend and said 'Oh, my God, the teacher is down," Youness recalled. "It was very shocking to see your teacher laying there. Everybody here is really close and for the majority of time (students) get along." Kelloggsville Superintendent Samuel Wright said privacy laws forbid him from commenting about the teacher or the fight.

"The students involved have been suspended until the investigation is finished," he said. The school's Web site lists Bauw as one of seven teachers at Discovery, which serves about 150 students a year in a nontraditional setting that often allows for independent study.

Students range in age from 14 to 19 and can get personal and drug counseling, tutoring, and one-one instruction.

The student who allegedly pushed Bauw to the ground turned 17 on Wednesday, but will be prosecuted in juvenile court because the offense occurred when he was 16 and the injury inflicted was not serious enough to warrant adult charges, police said.

No information was available on the other student involved.

Neither teenager had appeared in court as of Wednesday, Kent County Family Court intake supervisor Doug Gaddy said.

Macomb County Briefs Detroit News February 16, 2006

Juvenile center escapee draws a year in jail

A Romeo teen-ager who escaped from the Macomb County Juvenile Justice Center was sentenced Wednesday to one year in jail. Eric Shorling, sentenced in December to at least 10 years in prison for stabbing his ex-girlfriend in the back at Romeo High School, escaped from the center in May. He was awaiting sentencing on an attempted murder charge in the knife attack.

Widow opens home to teen

18-year-old finds hope as she readies to leave foster care

February 16, 2006 BY JACK KRESNAK Detroit Free Press

Elma was a little girl lost.

She lost her mother and two sisters to drugs -- all three died of heroin overdoses.

She lost her first chance at an education when she dropped out of eighth grade to care for her sisters' children.

At 16, she became a ward of the state because of the deplorable conditions in her mother's Ecorse home that were discovered a few months before her mom died. The Free Press is not printing Elma's last name because she is considered a juvenile in the foster care system.

Now, Elma is 18 and on the verge of aging out of the state's foster care system, and she may lose what little support she has. She will age out when she turns 19 in November.

But Elma has new hope for a better life thanks to a stranger who came forward after hearing about an effort to find adult mentors for older foster children.

Shannon Banks, a 52-year-old Detroit widow, heard about the mentorship program called the Children's Community Support Network more than a year ago and decided she had a lot to offer. "I thought, my husband died a couple of years ago, I'm by myself, reasonably well off, maybe this is something I could do," said Banks, a librarian at the U.S. Attorney's Office in Detroit. "Worst that can happen, it doesn't work out, and I don't do it any more."

The Children's Community Support Network, which was started in 2004 by the Michigan Supreme Court, later was folded into the Michigan Mentoring Advocacy Network operated by the Department of Human Services.

Because she was offering to let older foster-care children live with her, Banks, who had been a volunteer group leader for Alternatives for Girls in Detroit, was steered toward a supervised independent-living program run by Spectrum Human Services of Livonia.

Banks is given a stipend of \$400 a month to provide room, board and supervision for one foster child.

Earlier last year, Banks took in one child, Holly, who was from Genesee County and hated being in Detroit.

Elma came to Banks' home in the West Village neighborhood of Detroit last June, sharing the home with Holly and Banks' two golden retriever mixed-breed dogs, Floyd and Quincy. It was an emergency for Elma because social workers learned that the owner of the home she had been staying at had neglected Elma's welfare.

Holly left a few weeks later, but Brooks' home has been a good match for Elma who is working on passing her GED tests and has gotten a job cleaning houses for her uncle.

"Living with Shannon is like the best thing that happened to me, ever," Elma said. "I love living with her."

Contact JACK KRESNAK at 313-223-4544 or jkresnak@freepress.com.

Rules-making detached from reality

Adult-foster care proposal looks like union leverage

Thursday, February 16, 2006

Michigan's Department of Human Services is proposing new administrative rules for an industry that cares for 50,000-plus state residents. But are the proposed rules intended to help patients - or unionize 5,000 adult foster care and home-for-the-aged facilities?

Opposition to the rules' change has been mounting since last summer, when the rules were first proposed. Earlier this month, the political fat hit the fire when Senate Republicans introduced legislation to stop the Granholm administration from imposing the rules. That set up a clear test of legislative and executive authority. Ordinarily, the executive branch comes up with the rules to implement laws enacted by the Legislature; in this case, some lawmakers have concluded it's time to temper the governor's executive authority.

Under the legislation, lawmakers would bar practices that grant preferences to health occupations with collective bargaining. Here's an example of these too-zealous rules:

Under the proposed rules, "A home shall provide its direct-care employees with compensation and benefits necessary to attract and retain a sufficient number of qualified direct-care employees to provide for the protection, health, safety and welfare of residents."

How will the state measure compliance with this nebulous wage-benefit requirement? Here's the offending language: "A collective bargaining agreement with direct-care employees of the home resulting from participation of the home in multi-employer collective-bargaining activities ... shall be deemed by the department as sufficient evidence that the home is in compliance with this subrule."

Yes, this says in effect that the home has met this standard if it is a unionized workplace. If not, presumably the issue is arguable along the lines of what is "necessary to attract and retain sufficient" employees.

We're also concerned about the financial impact this could have on the state business climate as a whole. Small adult foster-care homes would be particularly at risk, and might not be able to bear extra burdens of state regulation.

Common sense dictates that, when you're in a hole and can't get out, you don't dig the hole deeper. Michigan is in an economic hole. This sort of rules-making, detached from economic reality, is just what the state doesn't need, for it would add expense to an entire industry. Preferably, the state should moderate its intrusive rules and focus instead on rules that would actually improve life for the home residents.

Failing that, the Senate legislation deserves favorable consideration.

The Jackson Citizen Patriot

District plans child-care programs

Thursday, February 16, 2006

By Keith Essenburg The Grand Rapids Press

HUDSONVILLE -- Hudsonville Public Schools is planning a before- and after-school child-care program serving students from kindergarten through fifth grade.

Administered through the district's community education office, the child-care program will operate at Georgetown and Park elementary schools.

Students from Georgetown, Alward and Bauer elementary schools will attend the Georgetown program. Youngsters from Park, Forest Grove, South, and Jamestown will attend the Park program the first year.

The Park program will be moved to Jamestown in fall 2007, after work is completed on a 20,000-square-foot addition there.

"We've wanted to do this for years, but space has really been limited," community education director Rich Kornoelje said.

Space constraints will be eased substantially when the district opens Georgetown Elementary, 3909 Baldwin St., in August. The 70,000-square-foot, \$13.5 million school will be the district's seventh elementary building.

The child-care program will run 6:30 to 8:30 a.m. and 3:30 to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, Kornoelje said.

The program also will be open on snow and half days, spring and Christmas breaks and teacher in-service days.

A director will be assigned to each child-care site, and programs will be staffed by paraprofessionals and helpers. Kornoelje said a 12-to-1 student-adult ratio will be maintained, below the state maximum of 20-to-1.

Program fees will be \$7.50 per child for the morning session and \$7.50 for afternoon. All-day child care will cost \$28, and half-day care will be \$14.

Fees will be reduced for families with multiple children enrolled. The initial prices will apply to the first child, with additional children charged \$6.50 for before or after-school sessions, \$26 for all-day care, and \$13 for half-day care.

A \$30 registration fee per child also will be charged.

Kornoelje said fees will be used to cover start-up costs, including purchase of supplies. Some families may be eligible for state assistance for a portion of the fees, depending on household income.

Kornoelje said the current proposal calls for the program to run only during the school season. But he said officials are looking at the possibility of expanding the program to include the summer months.

Word of the program already has begun to spread.

"We're already taking phone calls from parents" with questions about the program, he said.

Shelter plans advance

Thursday, February 16, 2006

By Susie Fair The Grand Rapids Press

GREENVILLE -- A faith-based organization is seeking the blessing of city officials for its plans for a homeless shelter.

Last week, the Planning Commission voted to recommend an ordinance amendment that would allow short-term housing for needy people in office zones. The commission's recommendation goes to the City Council, which has not set a date to consider it.

Representatives of God's Love Closet Hope Ministries want to open the shelter in the former Faith Baptist Church, 1015 E. Washington St.

But some nearby residents oppose those plans.

"We agree that a facility like this is needed," said Dana Stewart, of 931 E. Judd St. "It just doesn't belong in a residential neighborhood with an elementary school two blocks away." Barbara Vickery, executive director of God's Love Closet Hope Ministries, said people don't need to fear that the shelter will become a "flophouse." She said each person coming into the shelter will undergo a background check, and no one convicted of a sex crime will be allowed to stay.

"They're not vagrants," Vickery said. "They're people who have lost their job, their house and need help getting back on their feet. Some sleep in cars; some outdoors in the cold. It's heartbreaking."

The shelter would accommodate eight to 10 men for up to 30 days, according to the proposal. God's Love Closet Hope representatives said they want to eventually provide hot meals five times a week to adults and children by renovating the church gym into a dining hall and adding a kitchen. Money from private and corporate donors and grants would pay for that work, as well as the addition of emergency exits, a security system, showers, bathrooms and laundry facilities. Vickery said she hopes to get the shelter up and running within three months of council approval. The ministry is a nonprofit organization that distributes food to needy people in conjunction with Second Harvest Gleaners Food Bank. It operates under a lease-to-buy agreement with Faith Baptist Church, which has relocated to 315 N. Greenville West Drive.

"The church wholeheartedly supports GLC Hope and its mission to do God's work," said Randy Williams, Faith Baptist's associate pastor.

Sibley students warm to pin project

Thursday, February 16, 2006

By Ben Cunningham The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Keeping warm has become more of a challenge for some residents, but Sibley Elementary students are stepping up their efforts to help.

Sibley, on the Northwest Side, has long participated in the West Michigan Walk for Warmth, which seeks to finance winter heat for low-income residents. But this year, second- and third-graders in the school's inclusion program are selling poems and heart pins they made, in addition to collecting donations from businesses.

"The more we build up the money, the more we help," said Diamond Ezell, 7.

Students have sold 288 pins made of large clothespins, diamond beads and a heart medallion. They went to work producing 144 more last week. A ledger to the side of the classroom tracks sales, which, at last count, put fund raising at more than \$570. Each pin costs \$2.

"We've got to get to \$1,000," said Timothy Cason, 9, of the classroom goal. "We give the money to people who don't have heat."

The 28 students in a classroom that blends learning disabled and traditional students will participate in the Walk for Warmth on Feb. 25. Sibley students have participated in the walk for five consecutive years.

"This puts a different twist on things," said Mary Engelsman, a teacher at the school. "It teaches skills that the kids may not otherwise be exposed to."

While those lessons include bookkeeping and even the workings of an assembly line, Timothy had his own reasons for participating in the project.

"We are doing it so we can make people happy," he said.

Actor, advocate to end domestic violence to speak at benefit

Thursday, February 16, 2006

By Kym Reinstadler The Grand Rapids Press

OTTAWA COUNTY -- When Jane Patterson, an attorney who sits on the Center for Women in Transition board, heard Victor Rivas Rivers give an interview on National Public Radio, she decided Ottawa County needed to hear the National Football League player-turned-actor tell his story.

A dozen members of CWIT's "Reach for the Stars" benefit read Rivers' recently published memoir, "A Private Family Matter," and echoed Patterson's enthusiasm.

Rivers has been announced as the celebrity speaker at CWIT's 14th annual Reach for the Stars dinner benefit, to be held March 13 at Till Midnight restaurant in Holland's new Baker Lofts. Individual tickets are \$75 each.

Rivers also will speak at a luncheon March 14 at Covenant Life Church, in Grand Haven. Tickets are \$25 each.

"Victor Rivers is a national spokesperson for the National Network to End Domestic Violence," Nienhuis said. "You immediately know why if you've read his book. He not only survived domestic violence, he's become successful and is speaking out about his abusive childhood to help safeguard other families."

Rivers titled his book after a phrase the police used when he secretly went to them as a young teen, and disrobed to reveal bruises and scars inflicted by beatings from his father.

Rivers' father's treatment of his wife and children often wandered a dismal line between cruelty and torture. Rivers said his father withheld food, locked him in closets, burned him, kidnapped him and even pounded his hands with a meat tenderizing hammer until the skin was broken and bleeding.

Forty years ago, police had few laws to deal with domestic violence. They offered to go talk to him, but Rivers knew humiliation would send his father into a fit of rage as soon as the cruiser pulled out of their driveway. If his father's wrath was not directed toward him, his mother or a sibling would bear the brunt.

Rivers coped with the crisis at home by staying active in prep sports and couch surfing with teammates, teachers and coaches. He attended Florida State University on a full four-year football scholarship, and was drafted by the Miami Dolphins and had two years in the NFL. The Cuban-American went on to appear in more than two dozen feature films. He also has appeared on several TV series, including "CSI Miami" and "Miami Vice."

Rivers says society must intervene to halt the cycle of violence that occurs in some families.

Scams target seniors

By Rick Charmoli, Cadillac News

Mildred Ziel is not easily fooled.

Although the 82-year-old could be considered a sweet, kind-hearted woman, the same cannot be said when it comes to dealing with scam artists. When it comes to pulling one on Ziel, the person had better do their homework.

Like many elderly throughout the area, Ziel is a prime target for scam artists. Whether it is telemarketing, mail or even door-to-door, seniors like Ziel often can become victims of a deal too good to be true.

Ziel, however, has no problem deciphering fact from fiction.

Recently she was targeted by a telemarketing phone scam that informed Ziel that she was the winner of \$5,000 through a credit card company. She was entered because she was a customer who paid her bills on time.

The only question they asked was her age and the only problem was she does not have the credit card in question.

The next day she received a second call.

"The next day I got a call from a guy who was saying he was from Citizens Bank and he wanted to know my saving and checking numbers. I told them I turned them in yesterday and they hung up," Ziel said. "When I received the first call, I called MasterCard and they said they didn't have anything like that."

In addition to calling the credit card company, Ziel called Citizens Bank as well as the local police after receiving the two calls.

Ziel's story is not uncommon and one that Director of the National Fraud Information Center Susan Grant hears all the time.

Grant said not only do scam artists target the seniors, but legitimate marketing campaigns do as well.

"Even legitimate marketers can buy lists of potential customer geared for a certain demographic. They sell lists for marketing, mail and online solicitation," Grant said. "So if someone is looking for older people it would not be hard to obtain lists from legitimate list brokers."

"Just as they are attractive to legitimate marketers seniors are targets for illegitimate marketers for the same reasons," Grant said.

Reasons Grant gave for seniors being targets include some having disposable income, interests such as travel and the simple fact they might just be looking for good deals.

Another myth Grant said revolves around seniors and scam artists is that most of seniors don't understand or are unable to manage their own affairs. That, however, is not always the case.

"Most are people who are lucid and not socially isolated, active people who are educated, smart people," Grant said. "They are just vulnerable for different reasons. "It's a situation where they are home more to receive the telemarketing calls and sometimes they are too polite to hang up or slam the door in their face."

Ziel, who was born and raised in Cadillac, said she gets calls and offers in the mail trying to get her to send money. She said it is not uncommon for her to hang up on people three to four times a day.

"It doesn't make me angry but I get disgusted getting all these calls. As long as I got my little brain I will be okay," she said. "They figure once you get 80 years old they can take advantage of you. If they start asking questions, I hang up. I hang up two or three times a day."

Grant said there are various things or "red flags" that should make people question whether an offer is valid or just a fraudulent claim.

These "red flags" include wiring money to a stranger or out of country; any request or unexpected request for bank account number, social security number or other personal information; calls informing them they won something; and any e-mails from people from different countries claiming to have a bunch of money.

"If it is too good to be true it probably is. You have to take the word probably out and make it more emphatic and say it is," Grant said. "There are constant variations of new scams. Some people get victimized over-and-over again. And some people get victimized over-and-over again and don't realize or don't accept it."

Grant said if all else fails a person should simply ask for advice. This could include calling the National Fraud Information Center, Better Business Bureau or other organizations or businesses that specialize in various areas like investment.

"There are lots of different places people can go for advice and the heartbreaking thing is when they ask after the fact," Grant said. "It is important to report if they think they have been scammed. First line of defense is to listen to your own doubts and seek advice from objective third parties."

Cadillac Michigan State Police Det./Sgt. Jeff Herweyer is not a stranger to scams.

Herweyer said unfortunately it seems like some type of scam comes across his desk every month and every month they try to inform the public of its presence in the area. He also said it is never a good idea to give out personal information like social security number, date of birth, full name, bank account number because you never know who you are talking to no matter who they say they are.

"Don't send people money. Most cases it's buyer beware and most cases they lose money," he said. "They are a dime a dozen. We try to inform the public but in most cases if you send money to someone, you will lose that money."

For more information go to www.fraud.org or call the fraud hotline at (800) 876-7060.

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County's infant death rate drops But it's still above state average

Anthony Martinez Beven

The Battle Creek Enquirer

Although infant deaths in Michigan have been on a decline during the past couple of years, the infant death rate in Calhoun County is higher than the state average. The leading cause: Teen pregnancy.

The Michigan Department of Community Health recently reported a decrease in the state's infant mortality from 8.5 deaths for every 1,000 live births in 2003 to 7.6 in 2004, the most recent data available.

The county infant death rate is 9.6 per 1,000 births, a decrease from the 10.0 rate trend tracked from 2001 to 2003, according to data from the county health department.

"I would appreciate it if that rate were lower than the state's rate," said county health officer Dottie-Kay Bowersox, adding, "that figure has been significantly reduced over the years."

Bowersox stressed existing community outreach efforts will continue.

She highlighted the fact that the infant mortality rate among black people has been cut in half during recent years. It currently stands at 9.7 — higher than the county average, but lower than the state's rate of 17.7 among black people.

The rate reduction among blacks is a result of "a collaborative community approach" involving area doctors, hospitals and nonprofits, Bowersox said.

To address infant mortality throughout Michigan, the state health department touts it's Fetal Infant Mortality Review teams positioned throughout the state's high-risk infant death communities.

Ginger Hentz, planning and development director for the county health department, is involved with the review team in Battle Creek, which ranked fifth highest among major Michigan cities for infant morality.

The team, she said, was established in 1992.

Hentz said the process entails examining cases on an individual basis to identify contributing or present factors that may have precipitated the death.

She said deaths are then looked at in the "aggregate form" to spot trends, such as sleep positions, and noted that the team has launched a "safe sleep" campaign to educate parents.

All information gathered is passed to the Michigan Council for Maternal & Child Health, a prenatal and child health advocacy organization in Lansing.

Dr. Alfred Hamady, director of Medical Education at Battle Creek Health System, said "the most common cause" of infant death "would be premature birth."

Contributing factors to such births, he said, include smoking, lack of prenatal care, nutritional factors and genetic abnormalities.

"There seems to be greater number of premature births among teen pregnancies," he added.

The Calhoun County teen pregnancy rate is at 75.9 per 1,000 pregnancies — also higher

than the state's recorded rate of 55.2.

And data from the state health department show unwed mothers are also more likely to experience an infant death.

Julie Greichunos, divisional director at the Kalamazoo March of Dimes chapter, said good prenatal care is key for all expecting mothers.

"The more stable you are, the more resource you have," she said. "You've got teens that might not know the effects of smoking, alcohol and drugs. Our education educates young mother about that."

The March of Dimes is a national organization devoted to improving the health of babies by preventing birth defects, premature births and infant mortality through research and educational projects.

The Calhoun County Women, Infants and Children health program offers area mothers a chance for better pregnancy outcomes, child growth and development.

Diana Hazard, the county program coordinator, said WIC is a "big source of referral for these women to get the care that they need."

She noted they provide direct nutrition education, a food benefit program and counseling to women on the risks of smoking and substance abuse.

She said her office sees about 500 women on an annual basis.

"There are days when you ... can't even find a place to park," said Sara Galloway, a nutrition specialist with the program. "It's just a busy place."

In addition to WIC, Hamady said the Family Health Center of Battle Creek provides options for uninsured pregnant mothers.

"No mother should feel because she is uninsured that she can't get care. It's up to her to avail herself," he said.

Anthony Martinez Beven covers health and features. He can be reached at 966-0684 or <u>abeven@battlecr.gannett.com</u>.

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Weekly soup kitchen may open soon in Albion

Thursday, February 16, 2006

By Paul Fletcher For the Citizen Patriot

The goal of having a weekly soup kitchen in Albion to feed less-fortunate residents might be on its way to becoming a reality.

The Albion Volunteer Service Organization and St. James Episcopal Church have scheduled an initial soup kitchen for Saturday. But AVSO officials say they already have donations to go for another month after that.

"I think the chances of the soup kitchen being a continuous endeavor are pretty good," said Perry Toor, an AmeriCorps employee who works with the AVSO. "Sponsors have been coming in and people have been e-mailing and calling."

With continued local support, it's likely the soup kitchen will become a weekly community event.

"I think this project can somehow benefit everybody in Albion," Toor said. "It's a great way for people in the community to give back to the less fortunate. It gives the residents of Albion a place where they can go, once a week at least, and share a decent meal."

The idea for the soup kitchen, Toor says, came from a group of middle school and high school students called VolunTEENS. Toor is the activities coordinator for that group. "It's a project that the VolunTEENS wanted to begin," Toor said.

The soup kitchen is scheduled for 5 p.m. at St. James Episcopal Church, 119 W. Erie Street in Albion.

Based on his communications with other Albion organizations, the Rev. Edward Scully, St. James rector, said he saw the need for such a project over the past several years, but for various reasons, it never got off the ground.

"I just think the need is here and it's right now," Scully said.

The community has been generous in donating food and money, Scully said.

VolunTEENS members are scheduled to serve food on Saturday, and Scully will handle much of the cooking.

Scully doesn't know what the menu will include "until I start cooking Saturday morning," he said.

Fund Transfers Leave Senate

The Senate took Wednesday's session to clean house, passing several bills that would transfer money from a variety of funds to the General Fund in order to balance the Fiscal Year (FY) 2006 budget.

The only bill that prompted any real discussion was <u>SB 0959</u>, which is sponsored by Sen. Michael <u>SWITALSKI</u> (D-Roseville). <u>SB 0959</u> would authorize a one-time transfer of \$15 million from the State Survey and Remonumentation Fund to the General Fund.

Money in the Remonumentation Fund is used to pay for staking out property lines. The money for the fund comes from recording deeds, mortgages and other fees associated with property recording fees.

Sens. Switalski and Nancy <u>CASSIS</u> (R-Novi) co-sponsored an amendment to ensure \$10.134 million, which is the exact amount of money the fund received last year, goes back into the fund so the projects can be completed.

Switalski is also introducing legislation that would extend the sunset on the projects for another couple of years since the missing \$15 million will slow down the project, he said.

Cassis said the Legislature would have to be "diligent" about repaying the funds in part because defining property lines is a safeguard against expensive lawsuits. The bill passed 23-14 with Sens. James <u>BARCIA</u> (D-Bay City), Jason <u>ALLEN</u> (R-Traverse City), Patty <u>BIRKHOLZ</u> (R-Saugatuck Twp.), Cameron <u>BROWN</u> (R-Fawn River Twp.), Alan <u>CROPSEY</u> (R-DeWitt), Valde <u>GARCIA</u> (R-Howell), Tom <u>GEORGE</u> (R-Texas Twp.), Bill <u>HARDIMAN</u> (R-Kentwood), Ron <u>JELINEK</u> (R-Three Oaks), Michelle <u>McMANUS</u> (R-Lake Leelanau), Alan <u>SANBORN</u> (R-Richmond), Tony <u>STAMAS</u> (R-Midland), Laura <u>TOY</u> (R-Livonia) and Gerald <u>VAN WOERKOM</u> (R-Muskegon) voting no.

<u>SB 0838</u> sponsored by Sen. Bob <u>EMERSON</u> (D-Flint) doesn't transfer funds but does change the Social Welfare Act to limit Medicaid coverage for 19-20-year-olds and caretaker relatives.

The Senate Fiscal Agency estimates this will save the Department of Community Health (DCH) budget \$11 million gross and \$4.8 million in General Fund money for FY 2006.

All Democrats except for Emerson, Sens. Dennis <u>OLSHOVE</u> (D-Warren), Michael <u>PRUSI</u> (D-Ishpeming) and Switalski voted against the bill. Republican Sens. Cropsey, Hardiman and Toy voted against the bill, as well. The final tally was 23-14.

SB 0839, also sponsored by Emerson, would transfer \$11.1 million from the Comprehensive Transportation Fund (CTF) to the General Fund. This passed 26-11 with Sens. Liz BRATER (R-Ann Arbor), Mark SCHAUER (D-Battle Creek), Buzz THOMAS (D-Detroit), Irma CLARK-COLEMAN (D-Detroit), Martha G. SCOTT (D-Highland Park), Hardiman, Toy, VanWoerkom, Cassis, Garcia and George voting "no" on the bill.

SB 0960 sponsored by Switalski would transfer \$15 million from the Commercial Mobile Radio Service (CMRS) Fund to pay for a part of the debt obligation owed by the State Building Authority.

SB 0960 passed 33-4 with Sens. Cropsey, Cassis, Toy and Patterson voting 'no.'

<u>HB 5498</u> sponsored by Rep. Chris <u>KOLB</u> (D-Ann Arbor) would transfer \$2 million from the Agriculture Equine Industry Development Fund to the General Fund. The fund is paid for with fees and taxes from horse racing licenses and fines, uncashed winning tickets and a portion of the tax levied on Detroit casinos.

This passed 22-16 and was given immediate effect. Sens. Jud <u>GILBERT</u> (R-Algonac), Gilda <u>JACOBS</u> (D-Huntington Woods), Burton <u>LELAND</u> (D-Detroit), Barcia, Birkholz, Brown, Cassis, Cropsey, Garcia, Jelinek, McManus, Sanborn, Olshove, Brater, Schauer and Thomas voted "no" on this bill.

Fiscal Agencies Warn Of Reliance On Federal Funding

The state is growing ever-reliant on the pass through of federal dollars to support state spending — the result is the possibility of looming vulnerability, according to comments made by the heads of the state's two non-partisan fiscal agencies.

"Given the current state of affairs with budget deficits at the federal level, it's a reason for concern," Mitch **BEAN**, director of the House Fiscal Agency (HFA) told the House Appropriations Committee.

According to data provided by the HFA and the Senate Fiscal Agency (SFA), since Fiscal Year 1998 federal funds coming into Michigan have increased by 69 percent. As a percent of total adjusted gross appropriations federal funds have increased from 25.2 percent of all spending to 32 percent.

Sen. Mike <u>PRUSI</u> (D-Ispheming) asked SFA director Gary **OLSON** if the rise in federal funding was due in part to a relative shrinking of the state's General Fund. Olson explained that the answer is "probably no." He noted that the large federally funded programs that require a state match such as Medicaid, transportation and human services have been maintained.

"It's more that the federal government has gone on a spending spree here," Olson said.

He explained that as the federal government looks to make better progress on balancing its books, Michigan could get pinched in areas such as economic development programs, Medicaid and transportation.

In other news from the briefing of both the legislative appropriations committees, Bean noted that with funds flowing into the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) from the state's 21st Century Jobs Fund the agency theoretically would have enough resources to double its staff.

Under the governor's recommended budget for the Department of Labor and Economic Growth, MEDC is slated to receive \$16 million in 21st Century Jobs Fund revenue for the purposes of "administration" in addition to the \$2.4 million, which is the same administration funding level the agency netted this fiscal year.

In other 21st Century Jobs Funds, MEDC will net an additional \$20 million for marketing and \$15 million for the Travel Michigan Program.

Olson pointed out some major soft spots in the governor's budget. Soft based on some rather large assumptions. Specifically he pointed to the Department of Community Health (DCH) budget.

On the Medicaid program, Olson noted that the administration is calling for an average Medicaid caseload for FY 2007 of 1.54 million, up from that assumed in FY 2006 of 1.5 million. He added that the governor's recommended budget also assumes the FY 2006 Medicaid base is sufficient to cover anticipated expenditures. He argues that the state may need a current fiscal year supplemental appropriation to fund the rising Medicaid caseload.

If that's the case, he noted, the governor's budget, which is based on beginning balance of \$220 million, could wind up getting knocked out of balance.

The governor's DCH budget is also predicated on a \$93 million in General Fund savings that will require state statutory changes or approval of federal program waivers. Those assumptions include:

- The budget includes a five percent rate increase for HMOs and two percent rate increase for CMHs in order to meet a federal requirement that managed care rates be actuarially sound. The federal government will decide whether the rates and the funding included for them are sufficient. If the feds mandate more spending, that would increase general fund costs.
- The budget includes a plan to increase the hospital Quality Assurance Assessment Program tax by one percent. The change, if approved by both the state Legislature and the federal government would net hospitals about \$150 million and save the state's general fund about \$30 million.
- The governor's recommendation includes \$11.7 million in assumed savings from increased third party liability collections. The plan would be dependent on the state passing a statute that would require insurance companies to submit information on enrollees to enable matches with the Medicaid clientele base.

- The governor assumes a \$43 million savings in her budget from federal enactment of a provision that allows states to claim pharmaceutical rebates on pharmaceuticals paid for by Medicaid HMOs. Congress and the administration have failed to act on this proposal and a change of heart in Washington DC would be required for this to be realized.

Lawmakers also heard today about the governor's capital outlay funding proposal for the coming fiscal year. If the budget is enacted as proposed, the state would come within \$100 million of its statutory \$2.7 billion bonding cap.

Both fiscal agency chiefs also said there is currently very little information available on the governor's call for \$100 million in state capital outlay for regional economic development initiatives.